

Understanding Utopia

An Alternative View of Twin Oaks Community

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I. INTRODUCTION.

The first thing to understand about Utopia, or shall we specify Twin Oaks (Intentional Community), is *who* is explaining it to you, and why.

Most likely, you've heard about Twin Oaks through a passing mention in a college course or an article in the mainstream media, then, interested, proceeded to a web search yielding up the Wikipedia page, the direct page, and perhaps any of the innumerable in-house YouTube presentations. All of these narratives originate from a centralized location — the 'recruiting' office. Almost all information about Twin Oaks is controlled and conveyed by a select core of representatives; even when the mainstream media is the final auditor of the presentation, their journalist's access to information originates from recruiting management. This explains the unfailing regularity of the same talking heads delivering the same talking points, interspersed with the token new member exhorting the established line. The talking heads are not only the same people — they are the more privileged members of the *aristocracy*; additionally, the exhorting new members, the happy *peasantry*, are ever-transient faces, usually people who leave Twin Oaks within eighteen months of their membership. (More on that latter point to come.) This is to be expected: all organizations, whether Google, North Korea or Utopia, limit and burnish their image carefully to appear in the most positive light. Prospective members, going through the three-week visitor program, receive 'orientation' meetings by high-ranking members of the *aristocracy*, ostensibly conveying general information about Twin Oaks; in so doing, they verbally project an aura of authority, thus establishing and protecting their privileged positions.

This particular report originates from an *unauthorized* source. The author is Wortley Clutterbuck, a 60-year old man who has lived at Twin Oaks for over ten years. He is, by pension, a member of the *bourgeoisie* enjoying work stability and a self-determined schedule, possessing a few minor privileges, such as exemption from K (weekly kitchen-cleaning) shifts. He's never participated in Twin Oaks' politics, and has never managed a work area; it is doubtful the *aristocracy* would permit him. Although he enjoys living at Twin Oaks, he has ideological points to critically analyze; although he approves of the constitutionality (general values) of Twin Oaks, there are aspects of the monarchy (the government) he freely impugns. (To those who ask, 'If you don't like it there, why stay?' he responds: 'If you don't like Trump, the Supreme Court, racist police, etc., why don't you go to Canada?') This dissertation is his alternative perspective — and he offers it because debunking poppycock and satirizing authority is his *métier*. As Charles Fourier phrased it, 'The method of doubt must be applied to civilization; we must doubt its necessity, its excellence, and its permanence.'

If, indeed, a managerial elite assumes the prerogative to monopolize the media public representation of the entire community, then democracy is clearly lacking at Twin Oaks, and this thesis is readily conceded.

II. THE ARISTOCRACY.

Throughout history, one of the most characteristic utopian yearnings has been the proposition that *all work is equal*. A staple of 19th century utopianisms, e.g. Brook Farm, it gained considerable revival with a 20th century feminist reading. In a society where everyone receives the same compensation (access to shelter, food, medical coverage, clothes and discretionary spending), the

premise that *all work is equal* provides the basis for a claim of egalitarianism and classlessness. In actuality, whether Robert Owen's Harmony or Bolshevik Russia, the person making such a claim is almost invariably sitting in a chair while those who attend the lofty message are expected to perform physical labor. As Ralph Waldo Emerson observed, somewhat cynically, at Brook Farm, some members 'look out a window all day while others plough the garden'; here at Twin Oaks some members stare at Facebook all day while others ... plough the garden. A bit of implication is placed on the premise that, at least within a reasonable time, all new members will have equal access to the job infrastructure, thereby the high-status positions, labor autonomy or decision-making roles at Twin Oaks; this is only at best conditionally true, and at times patently untrue.

The highest stratum of Twin Oaks' aristocracy is characterized by its monopolization of high-status positions, especially in those of management and governance. The firmest base of power resides in *managerships*, which have no set expiration and, although (per bylaws) *technically* subject to community oversight (managerial review), receive little public accountability in practice. For example, one particular garden manager presided from the Clinton administration throughout the Obama administration before deciding to retire. This is a position granting a single individual control over a huge labor force and budget, not to mention a considerable influence upon the entire community's diet. The Visitor Program gatekeeper has held her office over two decades. And so on. As primary founder and propagandist-in-chief Kat Kinkade frequently explained, deflecting intimations of power-holding, managers are 'more exploited than workers' because whenever something goes wrong in their area, they are held responsible; besides, they can be 'recalled' by community sentiment. In the first instance, although managers may certainly *hear* complaints, they are not obligated to *heed* them —chiefly because, in the second instance, they are *not* subject to recall by community sentiment. 'Automatic' managerial reviews, scheduled every five years, have not occurred in the decade I've lived here despite several attempted challenges to particular managerial competencies. (One of the most infallible methods of determining who is an aristocrat at Twin Oaks is to publically criticize Twin Oaks, then wait for the first round of qualifying retorts.) Managerships are, for all practical purposes, *private property*.

This is not to suggest that managers do not necessarily work hard, long hours or conduct arduous tasks; my conception of an *aristocracy* at Twin Oaks eschews the trope of a leisure class wearing pearls and dining on oysters (however much recruitment travel and Facebook time may come close; and there often is a correlation between aristocrats and members with the highest VE and gift [outside income] accounts). The Emperor Napoleon subjected himself to more assiduous rigors than experienced by the average peasant. Nevertheless, even though a manager in charge of, say, the septic system is in charge of sewage, their aristocratic distinction lies in the being 'in charge of,' not the sewage. Managers often take on responsibilities many communards would eschew —repairing motors, chopping down trees, herding cattle, etc. —but, in a society where all members must perform a certain assigned amount of hours per week to maintain their membership (an average of 40), it almost invariably follows that a manager performs the work she or he *desires* to do; if not, these posts, which 'pay' no more than any other work available, are easily quit. Thus, desirability of labor, job compatibility, is a characteristic of the *aristocracy*, to which we add the essential quality of 'being in charge of.'

Similarly, this is not to infer that all managerships possess equal community status or resources. Some managerships are tiny, employing a single individual and run on a small budget, such as the herb garden; some managerships, such as the hammock business, are large, employing a sub-

stantial workforce with a huge operating budget and are run by a team of aristocrats (engaging a steward for subaltern tasks). Some managements are domestic, such as dairy, which produces only for community consumption; others are vital to the economy of Twin Oaks, such as tofu, which produces income to support all the community's activities. Despite these significant qualitative and quantitative differences, the analogy of *aristocracy* applies, just as anyone familiar with the social histories of *Honoré de Balzac* or, contemporaneously, Simon Schama (*Citizens*) observes that some of the titled nobility may no longer possess large estates or command great wealth or cachet at court, while others do —yet all of these nobles remain titled, above *commoners*. (To further deepen the analogy, this document's use of the term *monarchy* denominates not a single autocrat but rather a *court* of cumulative powers and interests, often contradictory and shifting in import; consider the political influence of the Marquis de Lafayette or the First Duke of Talleyrand vis-à-vis Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette.) Though occasionally Twin Oaks's *monarchy* experiences perceptible political dissent within its ranks, the upper echelons, whatever their differences, are always united in its need to keep the *bourgeoisie* sated with minor privileges and the *peasantry* from obtaining power.

Although managers, circumscribed by no term limits and accountable to no one but themselves, are the *landed gentry* of Twin Oaks, the most conspicuous members of the *aristocracy* are to be found in governance —the Planners, the Process Team, the Econ(omic) team and the CMT (community membership team) in particular. Put simply, managers have power over a members' access to labor, thereby the quota essential to membership, whereas government functionaries have power over the standard of living at any given time and the legal terms of membership itself. They interpret and enact the law (bylaws) thus —following the rudimentary blueprint of B.F. Skinner's *Walden Two*, where the conception of the Planner-Manager was introduced —this elite group prevents a 'despotism of democracy.' An example of this principle in practice is aptly exemplified by the process in which (18-month term) Planners (the final point of Twin Oaks' decision-making) are selected: although in *very rare* instances in which there are no sitting Planners, community-wide elections are conducted to fill these posts, the most frequent convention is that *Planners choose other Planners*, thus ensuring an ideological continuity, if not uniformity, of decision-making. This particular practice, redolent of court cronyism, greatly attenuates the idea that an 18-month term limit is much of a term limit at all. On a Republican note, this permits courtiers (and the occasional courtesan) an opportunity for advancement into the ranks of the *aristocracy*. To keep these flunkies on a short ideological lease, Twin Oaks traditionally applies the numerical principle of the Estates-General, which almost unfailingly insures that the incoming representative is 'outvoted' by the other two (senior) members.

Although all monarchical courts possess internal dissensions and intrigues, it must be added that the governance at Twin Oaks enjoys considerable homogeneity due to its deplorable tradition of bundled offices amongst office-holders. To illustrate, it has been common (in the ten years I've lived here), for an income-area manager to sit on the Process (legislation interpretation) Team as well as the CMT (law enforcement). Consequently, if a *peasant* working under a managerial purview wishes to air a grievance against that particular *aristocrat*, they will be forwarded to either or both the Process Team and/or the CMT, where their 'case' will be arbitrated by a team which includes the *same person* they wish to complain about; the particular *aristocrat* I mention is now a Planner. This example brings attention to the consuetude of a rotating, but numerically constant, elite monopolizing all the branches of government. Considering the practice of government officials often 'electing' each other, this bundling and rotating of offices

effectively centralizes 30 legislative functions into 10. Such is the problem of *aristocratic inbreeding*. This freedom from the caprices of direct democracy (i.e. *commoners*) —where ‘a vacancy on the Board of Planners is filled by the Board from a pair of names supplied by the Managers’ — stems from Skinner’s technocratic updating of Utopia where society is bifurcated into two estates: those with tenured degrees and those wishing to pass the exam. As it functions at Twin Oaks, community decisions are made by select elites, either in closed meetings or through an apparatus of ‘community elections’ predetermined by jerrymandered algorithms — i.e. *election games*.

Oddly enough, none of this government high-handedness is concealed; it is simply, and naively, ignored. As the official Twin Oaks website states: “[W]e govern ourselves by a *form of democracy* with responsibility shared among various managers, planners, and committees” (italics added) — in other words, ‘centralized democracy’ amongst an upper crust. *Income-sharing is not necessarily decision-sharing*. What is amazing is how few prospective members ever inquire about, or challenge, the implications of living under a ‘form of’ democracy ‘shared among,’ not the entire population, but by a *bureaucratic caste*.

Fortunately for the sake of diversity, Twin Oaks adds another estate to the social hierarchy: the *bourgeoisie*.

III. THE BOURGEOISIE.

The primary defining characteristic of this group is seniority. Although propaganda outreach emphasizes income-sharing and the ostensible absence of honorific titles, most membership seniority is a reliable indicator of social hierarchy. Not all living quarters are created equal, nor all work spaces; indeed, a resolute exemplar of seniority is the possession of physical territory such as ‘public computers’ reserved for an individual’s work duties, control of offices or workshops, as well as the better real estate among dormitory living. The exercise of seniority is also expressed as a currency of experience — and many a supercilious *peasant* has been silenced with the prototypical paragraph-starter, ‘In the 20 years I’ve lived here...’ Also popular is the axiom, ‘We tried that back when, but...’ Indeed, the very command of the plural-infering ‘we’ draws attention to an established order and its immature inverse. (Successful deployment of authority, such as seniority, benefits from the acceptance of those it is projected upon; any constant reliance upon the exercise of power demonstrates the pusillanimity of that power.)

The *bourgeoisie* is divided into two clearly identifiable categories, the petite and the haute.

The petite *bourgeoisie* are all members over the age of 50, receiving pension hours (one for every year of age 50 and above), reducing their labor quota incrementally. In this example, it is evident that, for the petite *bourgeoisie*, manumission from the *peasantry* occurs, not wholesale, but on the installment plan. (Therefore, one may consider themselves both a member of the *bourgeoisie* and the *peasantry*.) Nevertheless, pensioners are capable of augmenting this status gained from seniority by applying for various physical exemptions from onerous duties (such as tofu production which, at present, is ostensibly mandated for all community members, or all three estates), giving them a minor faux-aristocratic frisson. Pensioners are far from lottery-winners in that, theoretically, they are only free and clear of all labor quota upon turning 90 years old.

Characterized by receiving approval to start a family, the criteria for membership in the haute *bourgeoisie* is considerably more selective. Upon acceptance of a pregnancy application (and un-

planned pregnancies are bureaucratically taboo), a couple receives, initially, maternity hours and, more significantly, child-care hours (which is nearly 20 a week per parent); this entitlement almost cuts an individual's labor quota by half — and, incidentally, doubles their living quarters. (A pensioner has to wait 20 years to halve their respective labor quota.) Unlike pension hours, this allocation is not guaranteed, nor automatic. In order to be considered for pregnancy approval, a member (passing a mandatory two-year mark) must first undergo a *parenting apprenticeship* of sorts in the form of providing child care, or nanny services, to the extant families. In this practice, the customs of *aristocracy* can be detected; the Child Board, who apportions or denies approval, is consistently filled with extant parents, i.e. the recipients of nanny services. Interestingly, child care provides the sole instance in which the *all work is equal* principle is adjusted; a 'primary' (the supervision of one child) receives only 'half pay' (half labor credit). Yet the entitlement, when received, can be very satisfying for those wishing to have children; several couples at Twin Oaks presently care for two children, thus eradicating considerable labor quota —or phrased another way, are 'paid' by the rest of society to raise their offspring. In addition, these particular families have pension to look forward to after their children are grown.

Freed considerably from the constraints of labor quota, ancient pensioners and multiple-children families, the solid *bourgeoisie*, are consequently considerably freed from the exigencies and vagaries of labor managers, i.e. employers, thus attenuating their dependence upon the *aristocracy*.

Alas, this cannot be said of the *peasantry*, living by the sweat of their collective brow.

IV. THE PEASANTRY.

Twin Oaks' newest members have arrived at Utopia after surviving their evaluations as visitors; a community-wide poll — which is mediated bureaucratically by the CMT —decides if they are accepted as provisional members (a six-month stint). Thus begins public life for the *peasantry* —examined, appraised, scheduled and superintended. Everyone at Twin Oaks seemingly knows who they are, where they are and what they are supposed to be doing, while they know at most the aristocrats directly administering and scrutinizing them —thereby creating a psychological medium of dependence upon and deference to a judgmental hierarchy, an implication of conditional patronage. Because full membership is not assured until the provisional member passes their six-month input poll, a vote on one's citizenship, the new arrival, predictably enough, is encouraged to adopt an ingratiatingly tractable demeanor, the perspective that will be subtly fostered as long as possible.

Shortly after being deposited in one of the least desirable rooms at Twin Oaks, the new member is handed a labor sheet, a weekly schedule filled up with various tasks expected of them, and so begins the quest to 'make quota' (an average of 40 labor hours a week) lest they 'fall into the labor hole' (which imperils their membership). This dynamic presents the (aristocratic) area manager as employer and job coach and, soon enough, the new member finds themselves being offered a panoply of opportunities, many of which are repetitive, drudging, dirty tasks. A peasant may refuse any number of them, the peasant is informed benignly (as all expressions of authority are benignly presented at Twin Oaks), but the exigency to 'make quota' and the tactical advantage of pleasing superiors prompts obeisance. Certain fields are categorically unobtainable, such as indexing; some are conditional upon training (patronage), such as chair-making; while tasks such

as tofu production are seemingly mandatory, if not inexorable. Week after week, the peasant receives a new labor sheet, filled out for them by some unseen bureaucratic hand, and week upon week, the peasant tallies their hours in the attempt to write the number 40 at the end of it.

The division of labor, requiring a vast amount of unskilled work to a tiny fraction of skilled and status jobs, is largely successful because so many new members ‘turn over.’ Frequently a peasant’s voluntary indenturement amounts to 18 months, and then they depart, soon replaced by fresh recruits. Kat Kinkade explained the phenomena succinctly (without realizing or revealing its strategic demographic efficacy):

“[A]bout a quarter of our population leaves every year [...] New people come to the Community, full of their own enlightenment, ambitious to see Twin Oaks reflect their ideals, and ready to commit their energies to this end. They try to make changes, and they meet resistance. Old members object to their presumption, maybe, or are simply not impressed and keep on doing things in the old ways. Some newcomers become quickly discouraged and move on to plant their vigorous enthusiasms in less stony soil.” — Kat Kinkade, *Is It Utopia Yet?*, 1994, pp. 166 & 170-71.

The attrition rate is significant — no less an august critic of collectivism than Ayn Rand herself cited Twin Oaks’ turnover as evidence that communitarianism proves unsuccessful — but it is qualifyingly significant that almost all the departures occur among the *peasantry*. Although the current Wikipedia entry cites Twin Oaks’ turnover at 20%, within the echelons of the *aristocracy* and the *bourgeoisie*, the turnover is stable in the *single digits*; thus, the attrition rate of the *peasantry* (accounting for approximately one-third of Twin Oaks) as an estate stands around 50%, which is akin to times of war, famine or plague. Although a fifth of Twin Oaks bails annually, almost all of them peasants, their work does not — it remains as objectified labor in the kitchen freezer, in the tofu hut plant and in the hammock warehouse for the next year’s income; thus 20% of Twin Oaks’ *peasantry* is invisible.

Advantageously, the monthly visitor program brings another round of eager applicants from which to draw a renewed *peasantry*. (Ironically enough, these incoming, virginal arrivals often provide recruiting management fresh fodder for propaganda; some of the most enthusiastic votaries of Utopia are those who do not understand it yet. Almost every photograph of Twin Oaks features two types of people: interminable *aristocrats* and departed *peasants*.) Almost never will a prospective member inquire why there are always vacancies open in Utopia. Communitarianism may be unsuccessful, in that peasants find the daily grind in the Tofu Hut ultimately too lacking in incentives to continue doing so, but *monarchy* proves quite a success, in that Twin Oaks has continued, solvent and stable, for over half a century, providing its upper crust a dependable livelihood predicated upon and supported by a continual influx of idealistic neophytes willing to subjugate themselves to what they believe, albeit temporarily, is a utopian-egalitarian program.

V. CONCLUSION.

As history demonstrates, all egalitarian societies have been bedeviled by the lack of incentive. The flagships Brook Farm and New Harmony crumbled in less than five years; *Walden Two* never existed; and countless 1960s communes collapsed as the ‘Me Decade’ began. Scarcity of resources — discretionary money, standard of living, personal liberties, privacy — is frequently cited as the reason, but that is better understood as scarcity of individual incentives. Twin Oaks has survived over 50 years due to a serendipity of factors and I believe, within the circumscriptions of income-

sharing and its patriotic collectivist ideology, the retention of status, in the form of a hierarchy of entitlements and exercise of political power, have contributed expressly. It is entirely likely that Twin Oaks owes much of its success to adopting, within the confines of an egalitarian regime, a model of constitutional monarchy which rewards socially-savvy senior members with ‘emoluments’ of qualitatively modest, but discernible, prestige-based class differentiations.

If, in the pursuit of ideological purity, Twin Oaks adopted strict Jacobian principles, abolished its two upper estates, ‘reduced’ all inhabitants to the level of *peasantry*, leveled all income (that is, abolished VE and gift accounts), and established direct democracy and a rotating parliament for all official functions, I believe the attrition rate for the entire membership would skyrocket, matching or surpassing that of the present rate for the *peasantry*, thus leading to the institution’s collapse. That is what happened to the Oneida Community once its essential status hierarchy mechanism (‘complex marriage,’ or the practice of concubinage) was removed. The principled purity of voluntarily sharing material scarcity proves difficult when practiced with strangers instead of family and loved ones.

Society, even in its most basic assemblage, engenders a will to social distinction and personal advantage; if its utopian claims of egalitarianism were as puissant as the propaganda intimates, then rarely would any of the *many hundreds* who lived at Twin Oaks leave Twin Oaks for the very ‘mainstream’ these *many hundreds* of members rejected on the way in. It is not unreasonable to estimate that, of all of Twin Oaks’ members who have lived here since 1967, *nine-tenths* of this population subsequently departed; all the better for the *one-tenth* elite that remains. Initially, ‘escaping capitalism’ provides euphoria (itself suspending initial critical evaluation of the Twin Oaks experience) until it becomes evident that one has ‘escaped’ democracy, too; Twin Oaks operates on a more primitive, more regressive form of government than democracy — *constitutional monarchy*.

Utopia, love it or leave it — what an ingenious system; peasant dissatisfaction leads not to revolution but, turning its membership over to enthusiastic replacements, successfully entrenches the *aristocracy* and the *bourgeoisie*.

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